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ABSTRACT

Fourteen romantic school critics share as a group common views of: the goodness of man in his natural state; the organizational or technological society as inhibiting and limiting individual development; teaching as a nurturing act; and conflict in American society as something which unites. They all write in an a-political non-programatic tone but do not, however, provide adequate explanations for their view. Four general questions point toward a Marxist critique of the romantic school critics. 1) Is education in North American society a failure or a success? 2) What is happening educationally to the "poor", the deprived, minority group? 3) What is the most important function of North American Education? 4) What are the possibilities of educational reform under capitalism? Romantics have helped Marxist scholars by focusing attention on public education; providing clear illustrative material for a more fundamental analysis, and providing consciousness raising experiences for those who have taken their message seriously. It is the author's hope that reformers will realize that only through a revolutionary change in American society can educational reform occur in school. (Author/SJM)

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TOWARD A MARXIST CRITIQUE OF THE ROMANTIC SCHOOL CRITICS

It is with some trepidation that a social scientist presents primarily a non-historical paper to a group of historians. This feeling of trepidation is based on the sharp and seemingly permanent divisions in American academic life. The perspective which hopefully inspires this paper, however, suggests that it is essential to break down the wall between history and the social sciences. Until this happens (and there are reasons why it may be impossible under capitalism), neither the social sciences nor history can develop the critical theory necessary to comprehend the social world.

On another level it seems important for me to remind you that although Utopian and romantic critical thought has a long and distinguished history in North America, there is a Marxist tradition that seems to be increasing in importance at the present time especially in History and Sociology. Unhappily this Marxist tradition has, to this point, made virtually no impact on the academic study of educational institutions. An illustration of competent work done by Marxists is provided by "The Revival of American Socialism: Selected Papers of the Socialist Scholars Conferences."[1] This paper is presented in support of the tradition revived by these conferences.

Who are the romantic school critics? There are at least fourteen authors that I believe can appropriately be so identified. They are Paul Goodman, Edgar Friedenberg, A.S. Neill, John Holt, Herbert Kohl, Jonathan Kozol, Neil Postman, Charles Weingartner, Charles

Silberman, James Herndon, George Dennison, Everett Reimer, Paolo Freire and Ivan Illich. The level of their analysis ranges widely. Postman and Weingartner are concerned with providing classroom teachers with certain analytic techniques which they believe will provide better education within the existing educational structure even though they are critical of it. Reimer and Illich are concerned with de-schooling society, eliminating the existing formal institutions of education altogether. Despite this range I believe it is appropriate to refer to them all as Romantics.

There are five perspectives shared by these authors which identify them as romantic.

1. Man is viewed by these writers as if not completly good, at least free (in his natural state), creative, curious and loving. If mankind or children in school can be free from institutional restraints, then their natural talents and capabilities will come forth. Children are basically creative and interested in learning (although not, of course, what they are forced to learn) when given freedom and a creative environment. The individual human being is of extreme importance and is perhaps the one common characteristic that most clearly marks them as Romantics. They are not concerned with groups, or classes. This explains why, in spite of Kohl's, Kozol's and Dennison's[2] teaching experience in urban slum schools, none of these authors develop anything remotely like a class analysis of American education.

2. The Romantics view of society, although in most cases implicit in their writings, is I believe, reasonably clear. All of them are anti-bureaucratic and highly suspicious of technology. None of them see, for example, the use of teaching machines or individualized instruction in

the classroom as being an answer for anything. They are all critical of the structure of schooling in North America, although Illich and Goodman are perhaps the only two who spell this out clearly. The organizational or technological society is seen by them as inhibiting, and limiting; molding young people and adults into very unnatural patterns of behaviour, which prevents the development of their true nature.

3. The romantic view of teaching also separates them from many other educational writers. They view the act of teaching as essentially a nurturing act; that is, one which is loving. The teacher-student relationship should involve close personal relationships, affection, respect and not simply an intellectual relationship between someone with a body of knowledge and someone else who needs to know this knowledge. A former colleague in New York was sensitive to this theme in the Romantics when he suggested seriously that they must all be homosexual, since they were so concerned with this emotional and nurturing aspect of the teacher and student relationship. I would suggest that it is not necessary to assume homosexuality to explain this concern with affection, warmth and respect. Indeed, it is an incredible comment on our culture that a man could be considered homosexual for taking seriously the concept of love between teachers and students. Nevertheless, this nuturing emphasis in the writing of the Romantics is seen by many as being essentially feminine.

4. The Romantics view of conflict in American society is something else which unites them. They all accept the "American Dilemma" model of social conflict. That is, they agree with Gunner Myrdal[3] that many problems in American society are caused by conflict between deeply

held values and certain institutional relationships. In the case of the schools clearly the stated values of individual development, self-respect, emotional maturity versus the institutional arrangements which they argue prevent these values from being developed.

5. One final theme unites Romantic writers and that is a pervasive, a-political, non-programatic tone in their writing. There are obvious political implications in what they say about both schools and society and in their personal life and public behaviour, most may be classified as being on the left, but in none of their writings are there specific political programs for accomplishing their goals in schools or in the larger society. They do not seem to think politically and are not concerned about what some of my educationist friends would call implementation. These characteristics then are what I believe make it possible to discuss the fourteen authors I have listed above as Romantics. There are obviously important things which separate them but I believe that their common view of man, society, the teaching act, conflict and politics makes it appropriate to consider them as a group.

Having identified the Romantics, let me pose four general questions that point toward a Marxist critique of the romantic school critics.

First, a deceptively simple question, is education in North American society a success or a failure? To the Romantics, failure is clearly the answer. They are failing to develop free, emotionally mature, intellectually exciting young men and women. They are failing to develop young people with strong social ideals and a sense of community. They are rather, developing narrow, selfish, upwardly mobile, acquisitive and consumer-oriented subjects. While this description is true of the bulk of children and young people in our educational

system, does it represent failure or success? It seems to me that from a Marxist perspective, the development of the narrow, grasping, acquisitive, consumer-oriented young man or woman must be identified as a tremendous success for captialist society. For clearly, without this kind of socialization, capitalism could not function. It is only by ignoring the nature of capitalist society that one can argue that schools are failing yet this is exactly what the Romantics do! Immediately one might raise the question of student discontent and rebellion. As important as these phenomena are, we must be wary of assuming the fundamental nature of this discontent. By and large, it seems directed at the failure of educational institutions to pay off in capitalist terms, that is, the inability of students to obtain appropriate positions in the system of production after completing educational programs. What about the cry of relevancy? In many cases what is meant by relevancy is the failure of the student to see the connection between his course of study and some particular job or profession in the larger society. In Faculties of Education we frequently receive this kind of criticism (quite correctly I believe) but it has little to do with a revolutionary attitude toward the larger social system. If there is a failure here, it is in the system of productions inability to provide the proper number of places in various categories rather than in the educational systems failure to develop the appropriate sorts of subjects for those slots.

A second question which a Marxist critique must pose is what is happening educationally to the "poor," the deprived, and minority groups? No single field of education in North America has received so much attention, absorbed so much energy, or been financed so lavishly. It

is estimated that since 1960 about forty billion dollars has been spent on special programs for the poor and non-white with virtually no results, no measurable effect in learning or in behaviour change for any sizable number of poor or disadvantaged young people. The Romantics' response to this rather peculiar development has been to romanticize the poor. They argue that, by virtue of being poor, these young people have certain qualities and certain abilities which, in a sense, make them better than middle-class youngsters, give them added strength and, in effect, make them happy, creative and spontaneous. The poor are seen whatever their chronological age as being essentially children of nature and to be left alone protected and permitted to "do their thing" in the midst of American society.

The Marxist critique of this kind of romantic response would begin by pointing out that social class differences have not been accidentally arrived at in North America and are, in fact, perpetuated by the school system since they are required by a capitalist system of production. "Doing your own thing" is a possibility for only some of the children of the middle classes. Social sub-cultures are not only produced by, but are a reflection of, the hierarchial stratification related to production in capitalist society, they are in turn necessary to the reproduction of a properly socialized labour force. Different social classes must, in other words, behave differently, have different values so that children from these different social classes can be available to fill positions in the system of production. Michael B. Katz in Class Bureaucracy and Schools,[4] has argued persuasively that by 1875 when public systemsof education were being initiated in North America, the primary purpose of public education was not to provide

skills, but rather to develop young people that would fit into the social relations of production in capitalist enterprise. Although Katz's argument that American society had a choice in the 19th century about what form its education would take, seems to me very wide of the mark, his argument about the development of what he calls "incipient bureaucracy" is quite revealing and effectively challenges the standard view of the growth of American education.

The third question which Marxists would put to Romantics is, what is the most important function of North American education? Is it providing knowledge and developing skills or imparting values? Many of the Romantics, while noting the bad values inherent in schooling fail to see the linkage between values like docility, conformity and selfishness and the system of production in American society. Illich's naive suggestion for replacing the entire educational system, with voluntary skill-development centres, shows the romantic unawareness of this linkage most clearly. The Marxist position here would have to be, as the reference to Katz above indicates, that the imparting of values or what might more properly be called the development of false consciousness is central to the entire educational enterprise. A noted American educationist, Philip Jackson, describes approvingly the beginning of this development:

> Work entails becoming engaged in a purposeful activity that has been prescribed for us by someone else, an activity in which we would not at that moment be engaged if it were not for some system of authority relationship. The teacher with his prescriptive dicta and his surveillance over the students' attention provides the missing ingredient that makes work real. The teacher, although he may disclaim the title, is the students' first boss.[5]

This seems to me an incredibly good description of Marx's concept of alienated labour. Herb Gintis' writing in the Monthly Review carries

the argument further.

> Employers value and pay more for more highly educated labour, not primarily because of their greater cognitive skills, but for their more favourable attitudes and work habits, that is, two individuals with identical intellectual achievement but differing educational levels, will not command on the average the same income and status. Rather the economic success of each will correspond closely to the average of his or her educational level, in other words all individuals with the same level of education tend to have the same economic success on the average (racial and sexual discrimination aside) almost independently of their scholastic achievement. Moreover, students are by no means graded on the basis of academic achievement alone but are awarded and penalized depending on whether they do, or do not, exhibit those personality traits required in a system of hierarchial production. The presumption is, therefore, that it is for those traits the bosses are paying.[6]

The fourth question which a Marxist critique would put to the Romantics is, what are the possibilities of thorough going educational reform under capitalism? The romantic answer is quite clear and unanimous. Although reform may be difficult, slow in coming, may develop in some areas and kinds of schools and not in others, it is possible and must be worked for by all men of good will. The Marxist response to this must be very serious doubt as to the possibility of fundamental educational reform. In spite of forty billions of dollars spent on special programs for educating the poor and non-white, no measurable progress has been made. The Romantics answer to this is that the reforms were attempted by incompetent bureaucrats, that the educational system is mindless and irrational and that the failure of reform is due to the failure of individual men or groups of men.

One of the most hotly debated and controversial educational issues of the past five or six years has been community control of urban Ghetto schools. Without exception the Romantics have been on the side of community control, since it is clearly an expression of the will of the community and opposes an unresponsive bureaucratic structure.

Community control would, so the Romantics argue, provide better education by concentrating more directly on the individual needs of the Ghetto youngster. A Marxist viewing the same educational controversy offers a more complex analysis of the forces at work. Paul Sweezy writing in Schools Against Children: The Case for Community Control,[7] argues that the real conflict underlying the community control controversy is a conflict between the local city ruling elite which opposes black Ghetto control of any institution and the national ruling elite which supports such control by the black community in the interests of national unity since it sees the Ghetto as a possible source of disruption.

> The powerful groups often with clearly defined separate spheres of interests which combine to form the local ruling class recognize that if a political challenge can be mounted successfully against any one segment of the local structure it can also be mounted against others. The organizational resources mobilized against the educational establishment could with the encouragement of even a partial victory be mobilized in other areas. It was for this reason in the recent New York situation that the illegal and racist tactics employed by the United Federation of Teachers and the Council of School Administrators were so readily accepted and promoted not only by the school authorities, but also by all the interests which profit from the continued exploitation of the Ghetto. The National Ruling Class on the other hand, has traditionally had little or no economic stake in the Ghetto, but is seriously concerned about its becoming a focus for social instability and rebellion. The National Ruling Class is, therefore, prepared to promote the program, including educational reforms, calculated to pacify the Ghetto and reduce the danger which it presents to order and security . . . . It is, therefore, no mere happenstance that the Ford Foundation under the direction of McGeorge Bundy, one of the National Ruling Classes leading ideologists and operators, has been involved in the New York City struggle for community control almost from the outset. The more community control there is, the greater would be the opportunity for the federal government to bypass the institutions in the local ruling classes and to deal directly with the most pressing and potentially explosive problems of the Ghetto.[8]

This analysis by Sweezy suggests the sort of contribution that Marxist scholars could make to the educational scene if more of them turned their attention to it. The fate of community control and other

attempts at basic reform in American education suggests that little can be done without the participation of teachers. Gintis puts his finger on the problem again,

> For teachers are bound, as are all of us, in our relations with others to reflect in their relation to students a mentality established through their own day by day experience, not that of an abstract educational philosophy, and teachers are bosses only in the immediate environment of the classroom, in all other respects they are workers, essentially powerless in a bureaucratic and hierarchial ordered environment and hence tend to reproduce in more or less pure form the experience of alienated production. . . . Thus the possibility of a liberating educational system vis a vis students, hinges on the elimination of hierarchial order in the teaching industry itself and hence is part of the larger workers movement for control of production.[9]

Thus any attempt to reform education by changing the role and function of teachers is doomed to failure unless all relations of production are changed in society which would mean the end of capitalism.

In conclusion let me suggest three ways in which the Romantics however inadequate their view of schools and society must be considered helpful to a Marxist scholar.

First, romantic writers have focussed attention on public education in a very important way. The thinking of the educated American public about schools has never been the same since Paul Goodman's Growing Up Absurd.[10] The attention focussed on the schools by the Romantics has begun to shake the belief in the sacredness of educational institutions. The myth of school as a benign, if not beneficent institution will probably never be re-established in this society. The Romantics have begun the job of showing that the "Emperor has no clothes."

Secondly, the writings of the Romantics provide very clear illustrative material for a more fundamental analysis. The picture of

alienation, degradation and the development of false consciousness in school settings which the Romantics offer is very accurate and upsetting. However, as I have argued, they do not provide adequate explanations for the events they so vividly describe.

Thirdly, the Romantics have provided consciousness raising experiences for those who have taken their message seriously and attempted to engage in romantic practice. I am referring here to the whole radical reform and/or free school movement. It is interesting in this connection to note the ideological history of an important quarterly journal published in Canada, This Magazine is About Schools.[11] It began publication in 1966 as a clearly reformist, romantic quarterly, with articles by Friedenberg, Goodman, Dennison, Kohl, and later Illich. But over the past six years the editors have become increasingly disenchanted with reformist school critics and with free schools. In its most recent issues (Summer and Fall of 1971) it has begun to redirect its editorial position away from the free school--counter-culture movement and is now intent on becoming a Marxist educational journal.

This consciousness raising function of the Romantics is most important for I would predict that with the failure of both liberal reform and the free school movement, more American educators will realize that the dream of the "good" school in the "bad" society is impossible and will begin to work for a more fundamental, indeed a revolutionary change in American society.

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NOTES

1. George Fischer (ed.). The Revival of American Socialism: Selected Papers of the Socialist Scholars Conference. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

2. See Herbert Kohl. Thirty-Six Children. (New York: New American Library, 1967); Johnathon Kozol. Death At An Early Age. (New York: Bantam, 1970); George Dennison. The Lives of Children. (New York: Random House, 1969).

3. Gunnar Myrdal. An American Dilemma. (New York: Harper and Bros., 1944).

4. Michael B. Katz. Class Bureaucracy and Schools. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971).

5. Philip W. Jackson. Life in Classrooms. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 31.

6. Herb Gintis. "The Politics of Education," in Monthly Review, Volume 23, No. 7, December, 1971, p. 46.

7. Paul Sweezy. "The Implication of Community Control," in Schools Against Children, edited by Annette T. Rubinstein, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970).

8. Ibid., p. 272.

9. Herb Gintis. "The Politics of Education," in Monthly Review, Volume 23, No. 7, December, 1971, p. 47.

10. Paul Goodman. Growing Up Absurd. (New York: Random House, 1960).

11. This Magazine is About Schools. (Toronto: P.O. Box 876, Terminal 'A').